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BRASS RING THINKING.

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THIS DOCUMENT IS A COPY OF A SPEECH WHICH LOOKS AT EDUCATIONAL CHANGE FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF THE SOCIAL SCIENTIST. THE AUTHORS POINT OUT THAT EDUCATIONAL HISTORY SUPPORTS THE THESIS THAT CHANGES IN THE AIMS AND FUNCTIONS OF PUBLIC EDUCATION ARE DIRECTLY RELATED TO THE VIEW THE LARGER SOCIAL CONTEXT HOLDS OF ITS OWN AIMS AND FUNCTIONS. THEY DISCUSSED CURRENT CHANGES IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES WITH RESPECT TO TODAY'S GROWING CONCERN FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIL RIGHTS, AND CONSIDERED THE EFFECTS THIS CONCERN COULD HAVE ON THE IMPETUS FOR CHANGE IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES CURRICULUM IF OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS CAN DISCARD THE TRADITIONAL VIEWS OF THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES. THE AUTHORS CONTEND THAT THE SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEMBLE BENJAMIN'S SABER-TOOTH CURRICULUM. THE QUESTION OF WHAT IS BEING DONE TO REMEDY THE SITUATION IS RAISED AND DISCUSSED WITH RESPECT TO LEARNING THEORY AND RETENTION. THE MAJOR IDEAS IN SOCIAL STUDIES FOR THE LAST 30 YEARS ARE PRESENTED AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE CONCEPTS ARE DISCUSSED. THE AUTHORS NOT ONLY SUGGEST THAT ALL EDUCATION SHOULD EMPHASIZE THINKING EFFECTIVELY, COMMUNICATING THOUGHT, MAKING RELEVANT JUDGMENTS, AND DISCRIMINATING AMONG VALUE CHOICES, BUT ALSO THAT THE TEACHER AS A SOCIAL SCIENTIST SHOULD DIRECT THE EFFECTIVE THINKING ABILITIES ON THE HUMAN EFFORT, RATHER THAN ON SIMPLE MASTERY OF ACCUMULATED FACTS. (RD)

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BRASS RING THINKING

by

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The impetus for educational change seldom comes from within the education cadre. The history of education seems to point to the view that changes in the aims and functions of public education are directly related to how the larger social context views its own aims and functions.

This implies that the public school is conservative by the nature of both its justification and consequent structure.

The paradox is that this conservative, slumbering giant is also expected to be a vehicle of social change.

When the larger social matrix is occasionally jolted into the realization that the 20th century is here, the public school, venerable and vulnerable, becomes (to many) THE single cause of all our failures.

Sputnik is the classic example of external pressure. A newspaper in Philadelphia blamed the entire situation on the schools--in effect: if our schools had done the job, we would not be viewing the ascendency

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of soviet science. This absurd position, unreasonable and illogical, became the impetus of having our public school curriculum become the arm of foreign policy and perhaps the legs of our defense program.

The fact that two different social systems might value different types of educational experience for the young initiates didn't seem to bother too many. So, science and math stormed upon the scene.

Those of us in social science education know that a change in one thing brings about changes in many things. We knew that it was a matter of time until the opportunity would come for us to "up-date" a social studies curriculum which, in fact, had not changed much since the turn of the century. Our time would come only when the larger society showed concern.

Two concerns did emerge: one larger and all-encompassing; the other specific and demanding.

In 1962, the 20th anniversary of the first nuclear chain reaction, President Kennedy noted that the atom, the symbol of the new age, marked the culmination of some of man's greatest intellectual achievements. He claimed that this new symbol connoted not only unprecedented application of the fruits of science to man's use but also connoted the problem of whether the products of man's intelligence would contribute to welfare or to conflict.

> "The atom affects this problem, but basically its solution depends on whether the nations of the world can learn to order their relations, to identify common objectives, to work together....Our progress in the use of science has been great, but our progress in ordering our relations small. We must work ever harder to change this pattern and thereby release the creative energies of man so that the scientific revolution symbolized by the atom can be devoted fully to man's welfare." (Bulletin, Atomic Scientist.....Jan. '65)

This is the all encompassing concern. Science as a product is not enough. But we are beginning to realize that science is not product alone: there is a process and an attitude which allows the product to emerge...and the process and attitude are social. We are beginning to ask if we cannot apply man's intelligence to the "ordering of our relations."

In its simplest form, this means: can we not move against the unreasonable, irrational, random and at times chaotic activity of man as a social being?

Can we not bring the application of man's intelligence to things social? Is this not perhaps our greatest all encompassing challenge?

The more specific and demanding concern which asks for an all out attack on the unreasonable, irrational and the chaotic in our society is the growing awareness of the human factor. The growing concern for human rights and civil rights provides evidence.

These two concerns are forcing the schools to look at themselves.

It is about time. When we look at a television set and marvel at it because it is a scientific product, cannot we also be aware of the social organization and processes which went into the product? And, can we not gain a maturity (some reasonable expectations) regarding the great social revolution in which we are participants and not merely observers?

The external impetus for change in the social science curriculum is here. The question is: Can the slumbering giant discard its tranquillizer pills--pills in the form of neatly packaged idea capsules coated with 18th and 19th century views? Whether or not the slumbering giant awakens depends on the size of the public alarm clock.

The problem we face is best exemplified by one of the educational parables. The classic one is the story of the saber-tooth curriculum. Briefly it runs like this:

1. Centuries ago there was a small village. People depended on the ability of members of its society to: a) fish, b) hunt, and c) make small huts.
2. Schools were established for the young: students were taught to fish in nearby streams, to search the forests for animals, and to gather materials and build huts. Everyone was pleased--with these tools being given to the young, the adult society could perpetuate itself.
3. Many centuries later, we find the small village given way to a large metropolitan area. The streams are polluted, the forests have long since disappeared, and large sprawling apartment houses have replaced the huts.
4. The school curriculum? a) elementary fishing 102 and advanced fishing 104; b) hunting 107, and c) hut building 208. These are required subjects.

Let's have a flashback on the experience which we has as students taking social studies. Let's go back thirty years: To what were we exposed?

We learned good citizenship: that is, we learned to be on time, to say "thank you," to wait our turn, to stand in line, to repeat things in unison, to respect authority...in general, we learned that success was being nice.

There were certain rules one had to play to "get ahead" in school. Good citizenship and good manners were synonomous and social studies education was a nebulous thing which outlined the "game" for us.

As students, (we didn't know it at the time), we encountered a theory which became a rather absolute law. It was called the concentric circle approach. This approach maintained that we must go from the near to the far. Few took the time to note that this was <u>not</u> necessarily a physical location type of thing and that a physically distant thing might be a near "experience." We all lived in one neat

expanding world. The fact that we live in many worlds didn't seem to be too important. So, we learned about the family and after mastering this we went to the neighborhood as a geographic entity--from here to the community as a geographic entity. And we studied the postman, the fireman, the policeman...these were all nice guys who helped us.

There was also something that prevailed in the total school atmosphere. Three major ideas appearing in the form of three major canvases. Upon these canvases all sub-ideas were painted. These were three big ideas which permeated everything we did and which we absorbed by osmosis because our teachers probably accepted this just as we did. The three ideas, the three large pieces of canvas, ran pretty much as follows:

1. The Horatio Alger Idea: If we were honest, frugal, loyal, friendly, courteous, kind, cheerful, willing, and hard working, we would not only be morally good people but that the invisible hand of destiny would rest upon our shoulders. Our chance for success would surely come. It was the old Protestant Ethic and it was a world view which was built into all of our activities. And, of course, if you didn't succeed it meant that you didn't have all these wonderful characteristics.

   Based on the above, the history we received was pretty much an Horatio Alger continuation or supplement. It was a descriptive story of great people who had all the virtues and who applied themselves. We had 18th and 19th century models. The story was not really one of human beings in the process of interaction and facing problematic situations (and, incidentally, in which the moral man might well have had several choices rather than the one!) Moreover, History was a great plan or design...a "manifest destiny" and our job was to look at the stars which helped us fulfill that destiny. Note: We were not directly taught this but the selection of content, methods, tests, evaluation, books, and teachers all painted the larger canvas.

   History, aside from the larger canvas, brings back several memories: neat categories of the nice guys and the bad guys--the white man and the Indians, the pilgrims and the English...

2. Now, this we might see but hardly any of us would buy a form of Marxist determinism in our elementary program. But, what did we get? Geography was a form of economic determinism. We were not directly taught such a determinism--remember

listing all the crops from Spain, France and England. No, we were not taught the larger canvas, we just lived. The books, methods, tests, evaluation, teachers, etc. implied a single causal effect: The belief that there was a geographic determinism for economic growth.

3. The third major idea was an implication about our minds. We were not directly taught this but we learned it from the larger canvas.
The mind was a Noun and "it" was a container and we students went to the school supermarket, filled our baskets with the polished pearls and then we had our baskets checked for the quantity of pearls we had grabbed and then our green stamp rewards were in the form of pupil progress cards. If we discriminated and grabbed a small amount of some thing we held of more value, we did not get the chance at redemption. The mind was a container: stuff it, fill it, and make sure it was available for counting.

You are thinking, at this point, that this really isn't too important...after all, we admit that these ideas were not directly taught. So what harm? The point is that we "teach" much more than we think we do. There is little defense a student can put up against the subtle underpinnings of his learnings and yet the larger canvas is used (not studied) over and over and over again. It becomes the automatic fountainhead, the source of certainty, the unrecognized measuring stick. But let us pursue this:

Suppose we internalize the Horatio Alger myth. The only reason a person fails in life is because he is lacking in the necessary virtues. An economic failure becomes almost a moral failure. We say that we teach the interdepencence of man but what do we really teach? How many hands are in fact tugging on your boot strap?

And what is this destiny which guarantees success? This type of broad canvas, implicit or explicit, has implications for the meaning one brings to all social problems. It provides a basic frame of reference... often a quite rigid one.

Suppose we internalize that history is a determined plot...existing,

in a sense, free and clear from human intervention; suppose we see history as absolute choices: one good and one bad in every situation. In retrospect the "bad" choice is not only defined (as is the "good") but emerges as a form of historicism which leads to such things as heroes, conspiracy, superiority, and ethnocentrism. In the extreme, this, in turn, leads to a chauvinism intent on dictating the primary values. This type of broad canvas, implicit or explicit, has implications for the meaning one brings to his own life and that of peoples all over the world. It provides a basic frame of reference...often a quite rigid one.

Suppose we internalize that geography is a form of economic determinism. This implies that change cannot come...it may be too bad but peoples must wallow in their climatic muck. Heilbroner writes in his The Great Ascent that "...economic underdevelopment is not so much a reflection of nature as of human attitudes and institutions." If the interplay of nature and nature---physical and social---is denied a priori because of our canvas, we succumb to fatalism by forfeit. Anthropology has reshaped the geographic canvas...and implicit or explicit, has implications for the meaning one brings to his own life and to the lives of others. It provides a basic frame of reference--often a quite rigid one.

Suppose we internalize that the term "mind" becomes real: that this descriptive term stands for an entity or container...that we follow the container metaphor to its implications: education can be passive on the part of the student; the teacher is like a gas station attendant who pumps the gasoline from the larger tank into the smaller tank and the size of each is already known. The process of education is mechanical and much easier for the teacher, school, and parent.

But supposing the term"mind" is replaced by the term "intelligence"---that is: looking, questing, gathering data, curbing impatience, expanding, being alive to alternatives, consequences,and process.

The terms become crucial: The one connotes a static entity; the other a dynamic process.

The one lures the passive nature of the child while the other courts an active involvement.

The one can be easily planned, structured and measured while the other demands a different kind of teaching and different kind of evaluation.

This, too, is a canvas which provides our frame of reference for the meaning we bring to the terms "education", "study","human nature", "teaching", "evaluation", etc.

But what has this to do with an elementary school program? We would argue <u>everything</u>. The point we are trying to make is that the school does have a set of major canvases which our youngsters use every day. The school does have an implied attitude towards major ideas. Our youngster can defend himself from some of the little things which bombard him (and we can help in this defense) but both we and our children have more difficulty checking the broad ideas basic to texts, methods, atmosphere, etc. which, in most cases, one implicitly building a frame of reference from which it is hard to escape.

The school <u>does</u> have a climate of opinion, a world-view and that it imparts this world-view to its students is just as much a fact as is the existence of a gymnasium or a library.

This is an essential concern of the elementary school because we are beginning to realize that a youngster's intellectual and emotional

readiness are learned to a significant degree in the school atmosphere. His attitude towards himself, learning, openness, closure, the need for certainty, the willingness to face ambiguity, use of intelligence, (...if you will, the sounds of different drummers)...is fairly well established by the time he leaves sixth grade.

We are suggesting also that the school can (and does) give learnings which have to be unlearned at a later date. For example the term "community" describes a process and is not a term designating simply a geographic entity.

The small, self-sufficient rural community is all but gone and there is a continuum (rather than a definite split) between small and large.

The term "freedom" is not a static term: it involves choices and degrees.

The exclusion of the impact of science on society (the learning by omission)--as product and process is inexcusable in this day and age... and we could go on and on.

The social studies appears to be pretty much like the saber-tooth curriculum. T. V. Smith has a poem which describes it beautifully if not woefully:

> There was a dachshund, once so long
> He hadn't any notion
> How long it took to notify
> His tail of his emotion;
> And so it happened, while his eyes
> Were filled with woe and sadness,
> His little tail went wagging on
> Because of previous gladness.

We suppose that if one were to ask about the health of the social studies throughout the country that the poem might suffice as a descrip-

tive statement.

But what are we trying to do to give life to the situation?

We know that retention of what is "taught" is quite low even for the brighter student. Over a summer's vacation, a bright youngster is doing quite well to recall 30 to 40% of the factual information. It is worse yet for the average youngster and dismal for the one having sincere trouble. This situation is not unique to students. How much American History do you know?

The psychologists and learning theory people have demonstrated that retention is enhanced if: the child can derive his own larger ideas; if the child is encouraged to "argue-it-out" so to speak; and if what is presented to him is in some kind of a logically consistent pattern which encourages him to see relationships.

If retention is what we are after, we must ask ourselves: retention of what? Here we turn to the idea that skills and concepts (categories) can be retained and can be used in new...and possibly unique...situations.

For example: we can teach a youngster about the nature of communism by telling him some affirmative statements which we call facts. Or, we can have the student go through a process of analysis in which he uses his intelligence to query, pursue, relate, question and we end up not with a regurgitation of the pearls we have given but with the use of tools of inquiry plus the general concepts which have been derived...plus a general process which the student can use in assessing fascism, conservatism, liberalism, capitalism, socialism, or simply an idea which he is asked to accept or reject.

Over twenty years ago, Harvard came out with a report which stated

education is not a process of stuffing the mind with facts...not just the imparting of knowledge but the cultivation of certain aptitudes and attitudes. The aptitudes necessary for scientific inquiry and the attitudes basic to the fulfillment of such inquiry.

Which abilities should be given priority? In our opinion we judge that a student's thinking effectively, communicating thought, making relevant judgments, and discriminating among value choices should receive top billing.

These abilities are not innate but can be developed by and through education.

And, parenthetically, these abilities are not separable and are not developed in isolation. Each is a coexistent function of a maturing intelligence. Although not in fact separable, let us look at the functional parts:

Effective Thinking: In the first place, we mean logical thinking: the ability to draw valid conclusions from premises AND the ability to assess the premises themselves. The ability to identify different forms of knowledge and the evidence one demands when "knowing". We do not mean the type of logic for a specialist or the kind of logic used in a single formal course in logic. Rather, we are concerned that the student see and use this as a way of thinking--be it in business or the professions, be it with personal decisions, or household decisions. This ability should help in choosing a career, voting intelligently, and in ALL AREAS IN WHICH ONE IS FACED WITH A RANGE OF CHOICES.

The type of logical thinking we want for our youngsters is the kind which helps him see relationships, to analyze elements, to combine elements, to seek solutions is a way quite distant from a random

type of "brass ring thinking".

Effective thinking, while rooted in logic, does include a broader range of mental skills.

An effective thinker can handle terms and concepts and not confuse words with things.

An effective thinker is empirical in that he looks "out" for evidence.

An effective thinker KNOWS WHEN HE KNOWS, KNOWS HOW HE KNOWS, AND KNOWS WHEN HE DOES NOT KNOW. His actions should reflect this knowledge.

Opinion is not mistaken for knowledge. Such a thinker accepts fluid situations and searches for the underpinnings in a variety of contexts.

He knows the power of intellectual humility.

Communication: A recognition that words are man made and that language is a process which is inseparable from effective thinking.

As the basic cohesive factor in any social undertaking, communication stands as the basis of our intellectual economy. "In its character as the sharing of the meanings, it is the instrument by which human beings are welded into a society, both the living with the living and the living with the dead."

The wisdom in knowing that the word is not the thing is an understanding which lures human relationships into a more humane type of social living. How many human lives have been given willingly for a capitalized noun without the slightest idea about that to which the noun had reference? Communication is an indicator of integrity and to the unknowing can be used to deceive or conceal. The understanding of language as a social force cannot be assumed to be taught as a part of

language arts.

If there ever was a social study, it is language. It is hard to understand why the social studies area in the schools have denied the primacy of such a study.

Making Relevant Judgments: Effective thinking and communicating is not done in a void and the making of judgment--regardless of what level or type--is bringing the intellect into play with experience. At this point the thinking person takes action.

Until this point he has had plans of action but the decision to act in face of the situation leads to an act of irreversible consequences.

The Learning of Abstractions is not Enough: And if these abstractions are to claim a valid justification it is the school's task to direct the student from the symbols of things as they are to the things being symbolized.

Discriminating Among Value Choices: Assuming that all social conflict involves goals and that all goals involve some proirity in values, it seems essential that the effective thinker know the sources, justifications, and implications of what he in deed values.

To simply memorize and repeat what one is told he values is to become a credulous robot. The fact that an individual is credulous in itself may not be too important. Although credulous, he might be right without knowing why...or, his credulity may never come to light because he is never forced to act in terms of it. (Bronowski, Science and Human Values)

The danger is when society is credulous and denies the heretic his question.

Each of us would probably allow our youngsters to be indoctrinated

in our way of thinking. Bigotry, fascism, anti-intellectualism is always the other fellow who won't enter the free market place of ideas and subject them to the public test. The teacher as social scientist should bring to bear the effective thinking abilities on the human effort... not simply an effort of accumulated facts...but efforts man has made and is making to define and refine the good life.

To paraphrase one of our Supreme Court Justices: the only justification for free inquiry, for free speech, for free assembly, for the democratic process, and for effective thinking is to foster an intelligent dissent. This idea is as radical as our Bill of Rights.

This effective thinking as a history of its own. It is as exciting, as intriguing, and as challenging as anything in the human effort. It is intellectual in the sense that it structures the development of man's intelligence. It is the story of science--its methods, its implied values, and its products.

Edwin Grant Conklin, many years ago, referred to this when addressing the Randolph-Macon Woman's College. In talking about the impact of science on our society he commented:

> "It is no exaggeration to say that the chief differences between ancient and modern life are due almost entirely (to the development of the scientific method)."

With great impact, he went on to say that the material changes wrought by science can blind us to the even greater contributions. The intellectual contributions emancipated man from various forms of bondage and superstition...and in a real sense freed man from environmental determinism. He pursued the sociological impact of science and concluded that the highest service of science to mankind was the emancipation of the mind, in freeing men from the bondage of superstition and ignorance,

in helping man to know himself, his own capacities and limitations.

It is difficult to measure this new found freedom from heavenly omens, earthly spirits, demons, and evil spirits which brought adversity, calamity, sickness. It is difficult to think that the impact of witchcraft, sorcery, magic....(and) the devil led insanity and epilepsy.

Huxley said that all science is organized and trained common sense. In action, this science has broken down some areas of superstition... and through application should concern itself the part of nature which is called man.

There is no doubt that science has changed our whole point of view as no nature and man. An education which refuses to look except at the material by-products of science is little more than an encouragement of students to be pigs at a trough.

Conklin concluded his talk with the following thought:

> "Science not only appeals to facts, but it cultivates a love of truth, not merely of the sentimental sort, but such as leads men to long-continued and laborious research. It trains the critical judgment as to evidence. It gives one a truer view of himself and of the world in which he lives, and it therefore furnishes an excellent foundation, not only for scholarship in any field, but for citizenship and general culture."

Conklin gave his address some thirty years ago...when most of us were wending our way through our elementary education: noting the political heroes, the crops from Spain, and fascinated that the postman delivered post.

All that we are suggesting is that we look at our major canvasses and apply what weknow. It seems that until recently not too many really cared enough to fight for the right to go through an active strain and stress of updating a program. The circular student ride is not enough.

The elusive brass ring may be tarnished at best, an illusion at worst.

In either case, not worthy of too much busy work.

Perhaps we can take some liberty with T. V. Smith's puppy:

There was dachshund, once so long
Who had a serious notion
To take the time to notify his
tail of his emotion.
And so it happened, while his eyes
asserted a factual alliance
His little tail went wagging on
To welcome a social science.